



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

# Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

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## Pheasant hunters should expect a repeat of 2016

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It happens about as often as a total eclipse, but results from the Iowa roadside pheasant survey, conducted during the first two weeks of August, are not lining up with what is being reported from the field and by landowners from around the state.

“Survey results indicate a statewide average pheasant population decline of 30 percent and quail population decline of 23 percent, but pheasant brood sightings are up statewide and quail are being reported everywhere in the quail range,” said Todd Bogenschutz, upland wildlife biologist for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources who coordinates the survey.

So what happened?

The lack of dew in Iowa’s ditches and fields during the survey timeframe is likely a major factor skewing this year’s survey results, he said.

“Most of Iowa was listed as somewhere between being abnormally dry, in a drought or in a severe drought, during the survey. We need heavy dew when we do our surveys because it’s the dew that causes the hen to move her brood from the protective cover to the gravel road to dry off before they begin feeding,” said Bogenschutz. “We coordinate our routes with that dry-off period. Without the dew, there is no reason for her to expose her chicks.”

He said major factors influencing annual changes in pheasant numbers are overwinter hen survival, brood survival and nest success. In years when snowfall is less than 30 inches, pheasant survival is good. Warm, dry springs increase nesting success. A mix of the two will nudge the counts one way or the other.

Most of Iowa had a below-average winter and a wetter-than-normal spring. Based on those weather indicators, Iowa should have a stable to a slight decrease in the pheasant population.

“During the past 54 years, we’ve had three years with weather similar to this year, the most recent in 2015, and in two of those years our pheasant population was status quo and one year it increased. This year’s results do not agree with these past years with similar weather,” he said.

“In a nutshell, drought conditions probably lead to a poor survey count in 2017,” he said.

Bogenschutz said he expects almost a repeat of 2016 pheasant season, where hunters harvested about 250,000 roosters.

He said the drought is also likely responsible for fewer quail counted.

“I’ve been hearing from landowners and field staff who reported numerous males calling this spring, which indicates good winter survival. If a person has ever thought about hunting quail, they should head to southern Iowa this fall. This could be the best quail hunting we’ve had in nearly 30 years,” Bogenschutz said.

The complete August roadside survey can be found at [www.iowadnr.gov/pheasantsurvey](http://www.iowadnr.gov/pheasantsurvey).

### **Upland habitat trends in Iowa**

Iowa is experiencing a gradual change in its upland habitat. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, between 1990 and 2016, Iowa lost nearly 3,000 square miles of small grains, hay land and land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) – all potential pheasant habitat.

“That’s equivalent to a strip of habitat 10 miles wide stretching from Omaha to Davenport. With the loss of small grains and hay lands to corn and soybean production, CRP is critical for Iowa pheasants,” said Bogenschutz.

CRP is a federal farm program. Congress is scheduled to begin discussion on the 2018 Farm Bill this fall.